



Free Democratic Movement

A Response to the Green Paper on Full CARICOM Membership

*A Strategic View of Bermuda's National
Interest*

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE:

This paper is offered in the public interest as a response to the Government's Green Paper on Bermuda's application for full membership in CARICOM. It argues that Bermuda should judge this matter as a strategic question of national power, institutional standing, and regional influence, while separating that question from the Government's present credibility, distinguishing full membership from participation in the CSME, and weighing both the opportunities and the risks with discipline rather than sentiment.



CARICOM
CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY

A Community for All



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bermuda should approach full CARICOM membership as a strategic question of national power, institutional standing and regional influence, rather than as a simple test of cultural feeling or party loyalty. The issue is not whether Bermuda can speak about Caribbean history or identity. The issue is whether Bermuda wishes to move from an associate relationship that is useful but limited to a fuller place within a regional structure where decisions are made. At the same time, Bermuda must be honest about the fact that, as a British Overseas Territory, any form of “full” membership available to us will still be narrower than that of a sovereign member state and will remain subject to constitutional limits, reservations and United Kingdom oversight.

A serious public debate must therefore separate three questions that are too often blurred together. First, does Bermuda want the additional standing and influence that full membership may provide? Second, on what terms can that be made workable within our constitutional position? Third, does the Government have the credibility and competence to negotiate, explain and implement such a step properly? These are not the same question, and the country is poorly served when they are treated as one.

Long before the present Green Paper, Bermuda was given delegated authority to negotiate and conclude agreements in areas such as goods, services, tourism, labour arrangements and wider regional cooperation.

The 2009 and 2016 entrustments gave Bermuda meaningful room to pursue practical regional engagement. Some of what is now being sold as a future benefit of CARICOM could already have been pursued under authority Bermuda already possessed. The public is therefore entitled to ask what has been done, what has not, and whether the real deficiency has been one of constitutional power or one of political will and administrative competence.

Bermuda has not strengthened its position in the world by standing alone. It has done so through durable relationships and alignment with wider networks of trade, education, finance and movement. The same principle applies to the Caribbean. Small jurisdictions do not gain leverage by pretending they can move through the world on their own. They gain leverage by being connected to the places where decisions, standards and relationships are formed. That is why culture should not be dismissed as ornamental or sentimental. Culture helps shape trust, exchange and opportunity. For many Bermudians, stronger ties with the Caribbean are bound up with a wider question of dignity, belonging and connection to Africa and the wider African diaspora.

The CSME, however, must be judged carefully and in parts. It is a package of different regimes, including goods, services, capital, establishment and the movement of skilled nationals. Bermuda should not treat all of those regimes as carrying the same promise or the same risk. Goods and services may offer some opportunities, but the scale of any immediate benefit must be judged against Bermuda's current realities, including our import structure and fiscal dependence on customs duties. Labour mobility must also be discussed honestly. The issue is not whether Caribbean people can contribute. They already do. The issue is how Bermuda chooses to structure access, reciprocity and protection in a way that is fair and workable. Establishment and capital are more sensitive still and should not be approached casually.

Much of the present public hesitation is not really about CARICOM itself. It is about trust in government. Many of the arguments being made against CARICOM are, in truth, arguments about competence, transparency, preparedness and credibility. The balanced position, then, is neither automatic embrace nor automatic rejection. Bermuda should treat full CARICOM membership as a credible strategic option, but it should insist on clear terms, proper sequencing and a higher standard of government before going further.

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THE DECISION BEFORE BERMUDA



What is Actually Being Decided?

This paper is offered in the public interest as a response to the Government's Green Paper on Bermuda's application for full membership in CARICOM. Its central argument is straightforward: Bermuda should judge this matter as a strategic question of national power, institutional standing, and regional influence, while separating that question from the Government's present credibility, distinguishing full membership from participation in the CSME, and weighing both the opportunities and the risks with discipline rather than sentiment.

The question before Bermuda is not whether we are capable of reciting Caribbean history, nor whether the language of belonging can be made politically attractive. The question is whether Bermuda wishes to move from an associate relationship that is useful but structurally limited, to a fuller place within the Community's decision-making architecture. CARICOM's own membership framework makes that distinction plain: full members attend, participate in, and vote in all meetings of the organs and institutions of the Community, while associate members attend the Conference of Heads of Government as observers and do not occupy the same institutional position.



The Government has itself framed the issue in similar terms, presenting full membership as the difference between being present and having a meaningful voice in the decisions that shape regional policy. For a jurisdiction of Bermuda's size, formal standing is one of the few ways in which we can widen our influence beyond what our domestic scale would otherwise allow.



The Constitutional Reality

At the same time, the country should be under no illusion as to the constitutional reality in which this decision is being made. The Green Paper and the 2024 entrustment framework both make clear that any version of “full” membership available to Bermuda will be narrower than that enjoyed by sovereign member states, with reservations, abstentions and continuing external-affairs oversight by the United Kingdom. That does not render the exercise meaningless, but it does mean that clarity is owed to the public from the outset.

The Three Questions

The decision involves three separate questions, and keeping them apart is essential. First, does Bermuda want the extra influence and formal role that may come with full membership? Second, under what conditions, and with what boundaries, would this fit within Bermuda's constitutional limits? Third, does the Government have the ability and integrity to negotiate well, speak plainly and follow through responsibly? Blending these questions into one may be convenient, but it does not help the country.



Any serious public consultation should therefore begin with three questions. What, precisely, is Bermuda seeking through full membership that associate status cannot presently deliver? Which treaty provisions or institutional obligations are plainly inconsistent with Bermuda's constitutional position and should be identified as such at once? And, if full membership were pursued, what would success look like five years later in measurable terms of influence, opportunity, resilience or economic gain, rather than in slogans, symbolism or aspiration alone?



WHAT BERMUDA ALREADY HAS THE POWER TO DO



Before Bermuda debates what full CARICOM membership might newly unlock, it ought first to be honest about what authority has already been placed in its hands. Long before the present Green Paper, Bermuda had been given delegated authority to negotiate and conclude agreements in areas directly relevant to trade, services, labour arrangements and regional cooperation.

The General Entrustment of 30th September, 2009 grants Bermuda “general authority” to commence formal negotiations and to conclude bilateral or multilateral agreements in defined fields, including trade agreements relating to the treatment of goods and services, tourism, certain technical, cultural and scientific agreements, and agreements concerning emigrant labour schemes. This is a meaningful delegation of negotiating authority in areas that overlap with much of what the public now loosely describes as regional economic engagement. Even so, the 2009 entrustment did not clearly and expressly grant Bermuda a free-standing power to bind itself to a CSME-style right of establishment or a broad capital-liberalisation regime. On those issues, the wider entrustment record, including the 1968 exclusion of “establishment matters,” points to continued caution, retained United Kingdom control, and no automatic authority.



The entrustment documents make it clear that the United Kingdom “must continue to be responsible” for Bermuda’s external relations; that the grant of authority is not automatic in all cases; and that prior approval remains necessary for agreements touching civil aviation, shipping, defence or internal security. It also states, in substance, that where a proposal conflicts with the United Kingdom’s obligations or policies, Bermuda must abide by the United Kingdom’s decision



In other words, the entrustment broadens Bermuda’s room to act, but does not dissolve the constitutional chain in which that room exists.



That delegated space was widened further on 11th March, 2016. The supplemental entrustment issued then provided Bermuda with general authority to commence formal negotiations and conclude agreements in relation to Caribbean regional organisations and affairs, including CARICOM and other bodies of which Bermuda was a member or associate member, as well as other Caribbean regional matters affecting Bermuda. Bermuda's own 2024 ministerial update confirms that this 2016 authority extended to agreements within the ambit of CARICOM, PAHO, ECLAC, CARPHA and other Caribbean regional organisations or institutions relevant to Bermuda.



This point goes to the honesty of the present debate and is not merely technical in nature. A fair measure of what is now being presented to the public under the broad banner of “CARICOM opportunity” did not, in truth, depend on full membership for its first possibility. Trade-related arrangements, services cooperation, technical agreements, labour-scheme discussions and a wide range of regional engagements were already within Bermuda’s delegated scope, subject always to constitutional process and United Kingdom oversight. The question therefore is not only what full membership may newly offer, but whether Bermuda has used the powers it already possessed with sufficient seriousness, transparency and purpose.

The 20th February, 2024 entrustment is revealing in this regard because it shows precisely what is distinct about the present exercise. It specifically authorises negotiations toward full CARICOM membership, while requiring that proposed texts be submitted to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, that a further Letter of Entrustment be obtained before Bermuda may enter into any full-membership agreement, and that no such agreement be signed without prior approval from the United Kingdom Government. It also preserves the United Kingdom's authority to overrule or amend proposed agreements and sets conditions in relation to external relations, defence and security.





It is clear that Bermuda already had room to pursue much of the substance associated with regional engagement. What it did not already have was the institutional status and formal negotiating track associated with full CARICOM membership itself. That distinction means the country should ask, calmly but firmly, which of the benefits now being marketed as a case for CARICOM could already have been pursued under the 2009 and 2016 arrangements, which were in fact pursued, which were neglected, and whether the real deficiency was one of constitutional power or one of political will and administrative competence.

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WHY THIS IS A STRATEGIC AND GEOPOLITICAL DECISION – AND WHY CULTURE STILL MATTERS



The Role of Culture in Economic Life

It is right to say that Bermuda should not approach this question on the basis of nostalgia, slogans, or a simplified appeal to shared ancestry. But it would be equally mistaken to treat culture as a soft or disposable consideration. Culture is not merely a “friends and family” package, it is the framework of habits, values, language, trust, memory and affinity through which people choose to cooperate. Economics does not float above culture, more often than not, it flows through it.

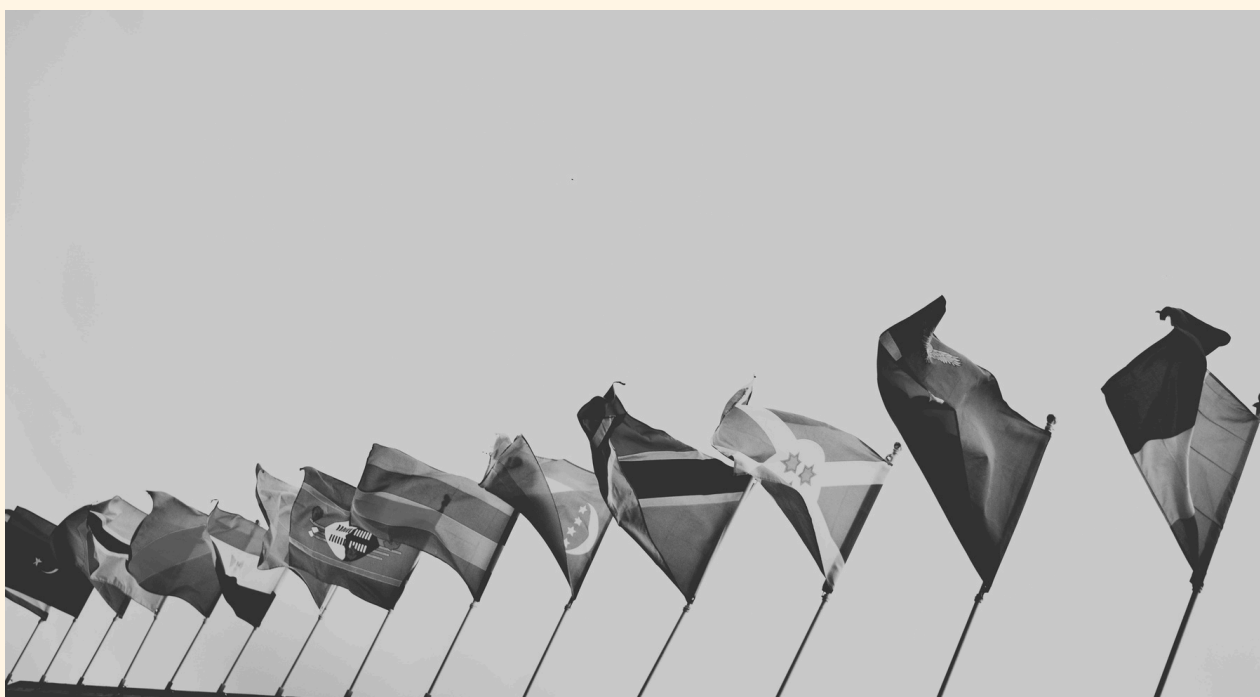
Bermuda's most consequential external relationships were built through inherited legal traditions, education pathways, citizenship links, migration routes, business norms and longstanding social familiarity. That is part of the reason Bermuda's relationship with the United Kingdom has been so materially significant. Under the British Overseas Territories Act 2002, Bermudians also became British citizens, and British citizens have the right to live and work in the United Kingdom. That legal and cultural relationship has created room for study, work, family life and economic advancement across generations of Bermudians.





The United Kingdom and CARICOM are not the same, but Bermuda already understands, from lived experience, that where there is shared culture, familiar laws, and the ability for people to move and live between places, there is often also greater scope for educational exchange, business formation, investment and personal advancement. In that sense, culture is not ornamental to economic life, it is often the glue that makes economic life sustainable.

For many Bermudians, the cultural dimension of CARICOM is bound up with a wider question of self-knowledge, dignity, belonging and the terms on which Bermuda relates to the African continent and wider African diaspora. That does not make the case for CARICOM sufficient in itself but it does, however, mean that the cultural dimension should not be dismissed as naïve sentiment.



For some Bermudians, stronger Caribbean ties may represent not only a strategic opening, but a fairer chance to participate more fully in relationships from which Bermuda, as a jurisdiction, has long derived value.



Others, understandably, will feel a deeper inherited affinity with the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand or the United States, sometimes across many generations. A mature national discussion does not deny either history, it simply asks whether Bermuda is prepared to understand itself fully enough to build from all of them.

Strategic Alignment over Symbolism

This issue should be treated as strategic before it is treated as symbolic. Bermuda has not strengthened its position in the world by standing alone. It has done so through alignment, through durable relationships, and through connection to wider networks of trade, education, finance and diplomacy. Our ties to jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada have expanded opportunity far beyond what our size alone would have allowed.



They have opened doors to markets, institutions, mobility and partnerships that have shaped Bermuda's development and extended its reach.



Small jurisdictions do not gain leverage by pretending they can move through the world on their own. They gain leverage by being meaningfully connected to the places where decisions are made, standards are set, and relationships are formed. Supply chains, food security, transport connectivity, energy costs, climate coordination, technical standards and regional bargaining power are practical matters of national interest. In a world where small countries and territories do not control the largest markets, shipping routes or geopolitical currents, influence depends on connection.

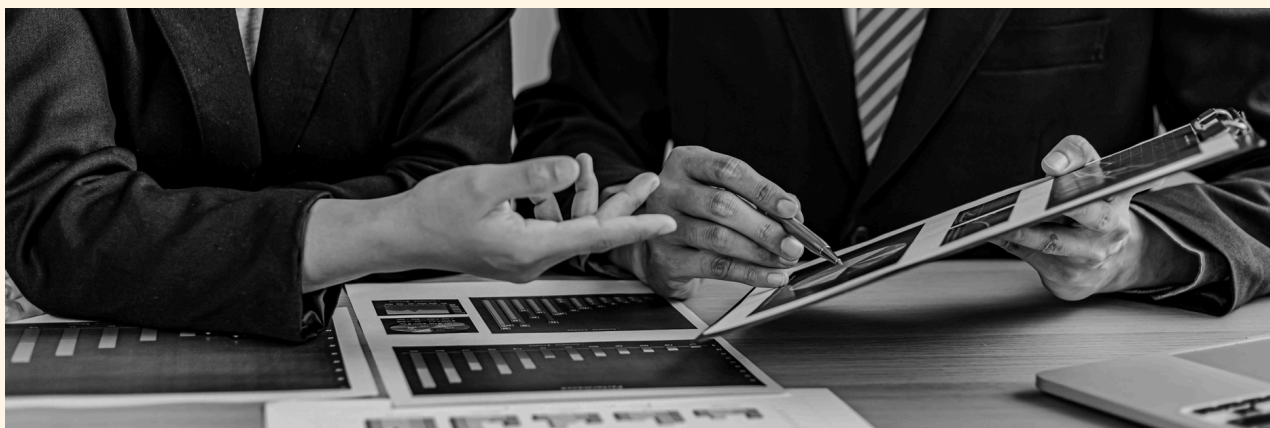
If decisions affecting routes, prices, standards and negotiating positions are increasingly being made in regional and multilateral settings, then not being at the table is a disadvantage that comes with a cost. Seen in that light, CARICOM should be judged neither as a sentimental homecoming nor as a reckless departure. It should be judged as a question of whether Bermuda wishes to widen the range of institutions, relationships and platforms through which it can protect and advance its interests, while being honest about the constitutional limits under which it must still operate.

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THE CSME QUESTION, AND WHAT COULD HELP OR HURT BERMUDA

The question of the CSME should be approached without alarmism and without romanticism. Bermuda has long accepted the value of mobility when that mobility operates through the United Kingdom. Bermudians, as British citizens, are able to live and work in the United Kingdom, and many have used that access for study, work, family life and economic advancement. The country should therefore be cautious about treating movement itself with suspicion. The more serious question is under what terms, in what categories, with what safeguards, and with what reciprocal benefit movement is to be considered.



CARICOM describes the CSME as a single economic space built around five core regimes: free movement of goods, free movement of capital, free movement of services, business establishment and the movement of skilled nationals, together with wider coordination in areas such as macroeconomic policy, production integration, competition policy, standards, consumer protection and transport. CARICOM's own explanatory material also makes clear that the movement of skilled nationals is not a general open-door principle, but a defined legal regime structured around specified categories.



A competent Bermudian approach would therefore distinguish between what can already be approximated under delegated authority and what would require treaty-based participation or further express approval, and then test each part against Bermuda's current constraints. That distinction matters most in relation to establishment and capital, where the entrustment record is notably more cautious than it is on goods, services or regional cooperation.



Goods and Trade Realities

On goods, Bermuda already has delegated authority to negotiate agreements relating to goods and services. But any claim that CSME-style goods integration would materially lower Bermuda's cost of living must be treated with caution unless it is supported by modelling. Bermuda's 2024 imports totalled \$1.2707 billion, and 75 per cent of those imports came from the United States. That means that to see any immediate benefit, Bermuda's trade patterns would need to change in a meaningful way.

Services and Regulatory Reputation

On services, the case is more substantial. Bermuda is already a service-based economy, and the CSME's services regime speaks more directly to a country shaped by professional, financial, business and tourism services than a narrow goods-based discussion ever could. The possible upside lies in greater access and reciprocity for Bermudian firms and professionals across regional markets, and in a broader framework for standards and commercial presence. However, services liberalisation can collide with domestic licensing rules, local protections and Bermuda's carefully guarded regulatory reputation if handled without precision. In this field, the central issue is implementation: whether Bermuda can negotiate the reservations it needs and administer the rules cleanly enough to protect both access and credibility.

The Movement of Skilled Nationals



On the movement of skilled nationals, the debate should be conducted with even greater honesty. CARICOM's own materials present this as a defined regime for specified categories, not as an unrestricted invitation to settle. Bermuda, for its part, already has some delegated room to negotiate labour-related arrangements under the 2009 entrustment. But that is not the same thing as accepting a treaty-based mobility regime. The choice is not between "closed borders" and "open borders." It is between different legal models of access and control.



Bermuda must also be candid about the domestic pressure points it faces, such as housing and cost of living, as any increase in mobility would have affects in these areas. A country already managing housing scarcity and everyday cost pressure cannot discuss labour mobility in abstraction from those realities.



At the same time, the labour question should not be caricatured. The Government has itself acknowledged that Bermuda has reached statistical full employment, that the workforce is ageing, and that labour shortages are now unavoidable in some sectors. The private sector is also supporting and calling for more liberal labour policies. That makes it difficult to argue, on the one hand, that Bermuda needs people, skills, and capacity, while implying, on the other hand, that qualified Caribbean people fall outside the conversation. Caribbean professionals already contribute materially to Bermudian life across health care, education, tourism, accounting, and other fields. The real policy question is not whether Caribbean people can contribute, it is how Bermuda wishes to structure access, reciprocity, standards and domestic protection in a way that is fair, disciplined and strategic.





That point is sharpened further by Bermuda's own work permit policy. The 2025 policy applies English-language proficiency requirements to initial Standard Work Permit applicants, with exceptions for nationals of countries where English is the native language and for certain graduates of English-language institutions. That debate should remind us that, for many prospective workers from the English-speaking Caribbean, language is not a barrier.



Establishment and Capital Restrictions

On establishment and capital, the position is more restrictive. The 1968 entrustment expressly excluded “establishment matters,” and later letters did not clearly and expressly grant Bermuda a general power over establishment rights or broad capital liberalisation. In both areas, the pattern is one of caution, prior consultation and retained UK control. They should therefore be approached carefully, if at all.



Fiscal Risk and Customs Revenue

Finally, there is the fiscal question, which should not be treated as an afterthought. Bermuda continues to rely meaningfully on customs duties as a revenue line. In the 2025/26 Budget Statement, customs duty revenue was projected at \$214.9 million even after announced duty reductions. Any serious discussion of CSME arrangements that may touch tariff structures, import treatment or trade preferences must therefore be accompanied by a revenue-replacement plan or a clear fiscal framework.





The proper conclusion is neither that the CSME is a threat in all its parts nor that it is a ready-made cure for Bermuda's economic problems. It is that Bermuda would be wise to assess the CSME on a regime-by-regime basis, rather than as a single package. Some parts may offer genuine strategic or economic value if approached with discipline. Other parts are plainly higher-risk in a country already facing housing strain, cost pressures, fiscal dependence on customs duties, and constitutional limits on the full exercise of external economic sovereignty.

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TRUST IN GOVERNMENT, AND WHY COMPETENCE SITS BENEATH THE WHOLE DEBATE

Much of what is presently being expressed as opposition to CARICOM is not, in truth, opposition to regional engagement itself. It is opposition to uncertainty managed poorly, to ambition presented without adequate instruments, and to a Government that has not yet persuaded the public that it can carry a project of this scale with precision, transparency and discipline.



In that sense, many arguments said to be “against CARICOM” are, on closer examination, arguments about competence, performance, credibility and trust



Distinguishing the Policy from the Messenger

The Government has sought to reassure the public on several of the most sensitive points. It has stated that Bermuda's work permit system would remain in place; that full membership would not automatically grant CARICOM nationals the right to live or work in Bermuda; that the Island's constitutional position would preserve domestic control over immigration; and that Bermuda would not jeopardise its relationship with the United States, including matters such as preclearance, by pursuing full membership. Those reassurances matter but they are not the same thing as proof that those assurances will be realised.



By the Government's own account, the present consultation is intended to generate questions requiring further legal review, wider consultation and "rigorous quantitative answers" before a White Paper is produced. That is a sensible admission, but it is also an acknowledgment that the public is being asked to debate a strategic national project before seeing the principal instruments on which an intelligent judgment would depend: draft membership terms, a clear list of which treaty obligations Bermuda would accept, limit or refuse, costings, economic scenarios and an implementation plan.

Bermuda's constitutional position leaves little room for carelessness. The 2024 entrustment makes clear that full membership negotiations remain subject to continuing United Kingdom control, including review of proposed texts, prior approval before entry, and retained authority over matters touching external affairs, defence and security. Under those conditions, weak preparation is not merely politically imprudent; it is structurally limiting.



That is why the issue of trust cannot be treated as an unfortunate distraction from the CARICOM debate. If the Government wants public support for a step of this scale, it must do more than sell the idea. It must show that it is ready to carry it out properly. The public is entitled to ask not only whether full membership might benefit Bermuda, but whether the Government has earned the confidence necessary to negotiate intelligently, disclose candidly and implement competently.



It is entirely possible for a person to believe that fuller engagement with CARICOM may be in Bermuda's long-term interest while also believing that the Government has not yet made its case in a manner equal to the seriousness of the decision. A weak messenger can damage a good idea, however, distrust of the messenger should not be allowed to become a permanent substitute for strategic thinking.



Requirement for Representation

There should also be no confusion about process. If this matter is ultimately decided through Parliament, that does not make it any less democratic. It simply places a greater responsibility on the public to make its views known and on elected representatives to vote with seriousness, independence of mind, and proper regard for the interests of the people who sent them there. On a question of this scale, Bermudians are entitled to expect more than party loyalty; they are entitled to expect representation.



If the Government wishes to strengthen public confidence before any White Paper is presented, it should publish, in advance, the matters on which Bermuda expects to reserve, the clauses that are plainly incompatible with Bermuda's constitutional position, the economic areas in which participation is being actively sought, and the fiscal, legal and administrative consequences of each. It should also invite independent scrutiny—legal, fiscal and economic—so that this process is seen not as a sales exercise, but as a decision paper worthy of a mature country. Only then will the public be in a position to judge the proposal on its merits rather than on instinct alone.



A BALANCED CONCLUSION, AND THE STANDARD BERMUDA SHOULD REQUIRE

Bermuda should treat full CARICOM membership as a credible strategic option, because institutional standing, regional voice and the ability to shape collective positions do matter for a jurisdiction of our size. But it should refuse to treat that option as a substitute for competent government, disciplined negotiation, or honest disclosure. Full membership may be a serious instrument of national influence. It is not, in itself, proof that the country is prepared to use that instrument well.





The proper approach is therefore staged, document-led and exacting.

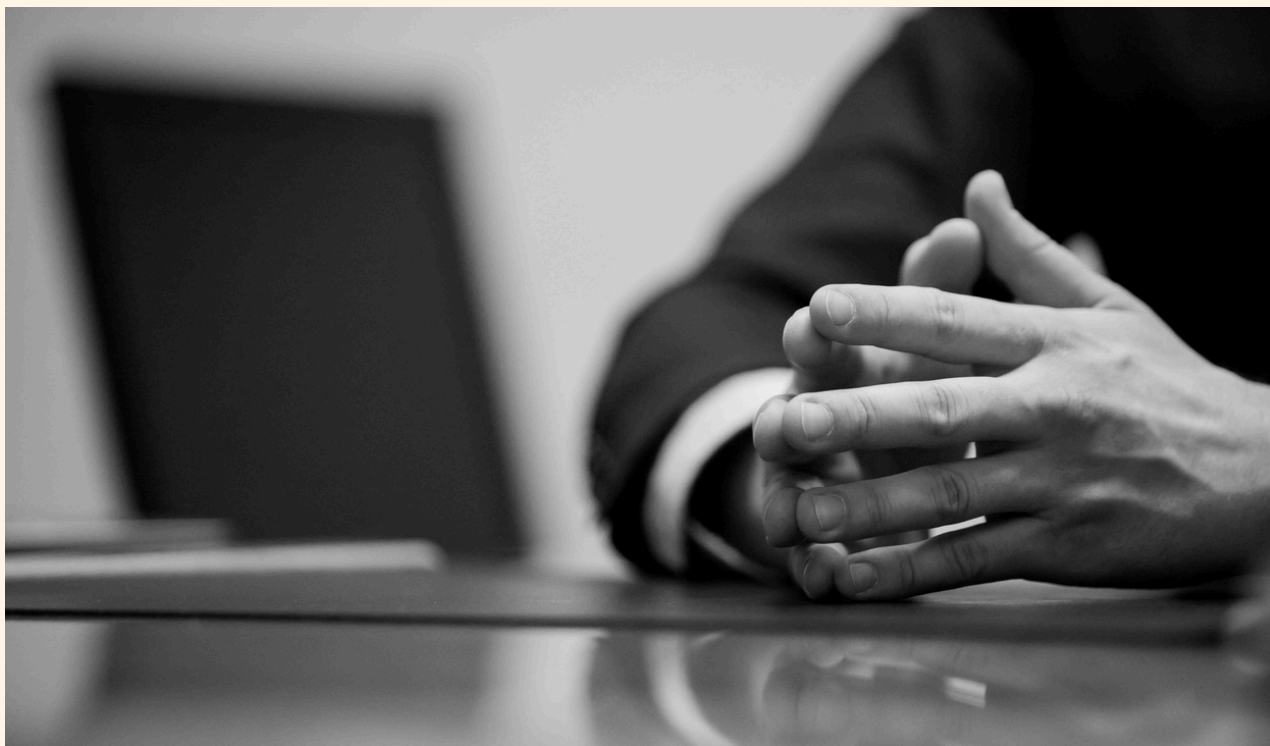
The Five Requirements for a Mature Decision

First, Bermuda should decide in principle whether it wishes to pursue the institutional standing that comes with full membership, recognising from the outset that any Bermudian participation will be narrower than that of sovereign member states and will require reservations, abstentions and continuing external-affairs constraints under the United Kingdom's retained authority. A country serves itself poorly when it pretends that constitutional limits do not exist. It serves itself even worse when it allows those limits to become an excuse for strategic drift.



Second, the instruments that make the debate real should be published before the country is taken from consultation into commitment. At minimum, the public should see the framework of legal review now under way, a draft schedule of intended reservations against the Revised Treaty, a fiscal note addressing any customs-duty or revenue implications, and a clear account of the manner in which United Kingdom oversight will define the boundary of what Bermuda can and cannot negotiate. The Green Paper process itself acknowledges that further legal review and rigorous quantitative assessment are required before a White Paper is produced. That should be taken as an obligation to show the country the workings before seeking its confidence.





Third, full membership and the CSME should be separated in principle, in debate and in implementation. Full membership is primarily a question of institutional voice, formal standing and regional influence. The CSME is a different matter: a deeper set of economic regimes concerning goods, services, capital, establishment and skilled nationals. Goods- and services-related arrangements sit more comfortably within the pattern of authority already delegated to Bermuda, whereas establishment and capital raise more serious questions of constitutional scope, United Kingdom approval and future policy flexibility. Making these distinctions clearly allows the country to understand more fully what is, and is not, on the table.



Fourth, Bermuda should make fuller use of what it already has. The 2009 and 2016 entrustments show that the Island already possesses delegated room to pursue a considerable measure of practical regional engagement, including agreements touching goods and services, technical and cultural cooperation, and Caribbean institutional engagement. Those powers should not be ignored while the country debates whether to bind itself to something deeper. Competence is not demonstrated by announcing ever larger ambitions. It is demonstrated by using existing authority well, building administrative capacity, and earning public trust through performance before asking for more.



Fifth, any CSME-related step that may increase pressure on Bermuda's labour market, housing stock or public infrastructure should be tied to clear conditions showing that the country has the capacity to cope. Bermuda is already confronting housing strain and cost-of-living pressure, while also acknowledging labour shortages and an ageing workforce. That reality does not compel rejection of regional mobility but it does require sequencing. A serious government would not discuss access in abstraction from accommodation, transport, health capacity, labour-market regulation and revenue. It would tie each step to demonstrable readiness.



In the end, the standard Bermuda should require is not complicated, though it is demanding. A country does not become more powerful by declaring itself more powerful. It becomes more powerful by negotiating carefully, disclosing honestly, reserving where necessary, and implementing competently. If Bermuda can meet that standard, then full CARICOM membership is not a cultural gesture or a political adornment. It is a strategic choice that may help widen the country's range of influence. If Bermuda cannot yet meet that standard, then the answer may instead be disciplined staging, firmer scrutiny and a higher burden on the Government to earn confidence through facts rather than assurances.

"A country does not become more powerful by declaring itself more powerful."

SOURCES

Primary and Official Sources

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- Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas
- Skilled nationals definitions
- Bermuda Digest of Statistics
- Budget Statement
- Housing initiatives update
- CPI release
- Work Permit Policy
- UK citizenship / BOTC guidance

Commentary and Public Debate

- Royal Gazette coverage
- Bernews pieces

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